

Rev. Shannon Kershner  
Woodhaven Presbyterian Church  
August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 – 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Genesis 32:22-31

### The Story of Blessing?

Do you like this story, this one about Jacob wrestling on the river's edge? I always used to think that I did. "Ah yes," I would think whenever someone mentioned it. "The story about the blessing. How lovely." Is that how you think of it—as the story about the blessing?

If this were about someone else, and the story was told to Jacob as it is told to us, he, too, probably would have thought it was the story about the blessing. For Jacob's thoughts were occupied from morning until night with the single-minded desire to get blessings. When could he get one? How many could he get? What did he need to do? Frankly, Jacob did not care how many people he had to deceive, what kind of bargain he had to strike, who he might need to knock out of the running—it was all about blessings for Jacob—no matter whom he hurt in the process.

We could say he was born that way. You remember the story of his birth—Scripture tells us that he and his twin brother Esau fought in the womb. And when Esau came out first, Jacob quickly followed with his newborn fist grasped tightly around his brother's heel. Even as a newborn, Jacob was not about to let Esau get ahead of him. That determination to get what he wanted no matter what was reflected in his name – Jacob. Jacob means "supplanter," which is someone who takes the place of another by force or by scheming. And based on his actions after his birth, we know that Jacob was well-named.

For it was Jacob, in his desire for a blessing, who tricked Esau into giving up his birthright for a bowl of stew. And it was Jacob, in his desire for a blessing, who conspired with his mother to trick his blind father into thinking that he was his brother Esau, therefore robbing Esau of his father's deathbed blessing. Esau was so angry with all of Jacob's lying and trickery that he vowed to kill him. So Jacob had to hit the road quickly, leaving behind all kinds of familial collateral damage, but leaving with his blessings. Yes, Jacob was all about getting the blessings, no matter how, no matter what, no matter whom he might hurt in the process.

Jacob's desire for blessing also dominated his relationship with God. After fleeing his brother, Jacob came to a place he called Bethel. And he was given the gift of a holy dream in which God promised that God would always be with Jacob. And, through Jacob, all the families of the earth would be blessed. That sounds like a pretty incredible dream to me. And yet, do you know what Jacob did when he woke up? He tried to strike another deal with God. Apparently, God's promise of presence was not nearly enough to satisfy him.

Listen to his prayer "**If** God will be with me, and will keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, **then** the Lord shall be my God..." Even after a holy dream, Jacob, in his greedy desire for blessing, struck a bargaining posture with God. He was not very interested in God's promise of constant presence, but rather, he was solely focused on his own desires for prosperity and abundant food and Galleria clothing. Yes, Jacob was rightly named. He even tried to supplant God's promise. His life was defined by his greedy desire for receiving blessings—no matter how, no matter what, no matter whom he might hurt in the process.

But, lest we be too hard on Jacob, perhaps we might consider if his desires and his prayer differ all that much from our own. I would be willing to bet that many of our prayers reverberate with echoes of Jacob's prayer. Barbara Brown Taylor preaches that our longing is very similar to Jacob's longing: "We long for protection, for prosperity, for a God who will operate within the domestic boundaries we have set for ourselves, without doing anything that would frighten us unnecessarily. We want to be chosen. We want to be saved, only gently,

please, by gradual degrees, so that we can see where we are going...<sup>i</sup>”. We, like Jacob, want to be blessed, but we also want to call the shots for our blessing—telling God how, when, and what.

W.H. Auden writes his version of our/Jacob’s prayer “O God,” he writes, “...be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.”<sup>ii</sup> Theologian William Placher calls these desires “the domestication of transcendence.” He claims we are constantly trying to tame God in order to gain a sense of safety and to preserve the illusion of control.

And I think this desire to tame God, to bargain with God, to tell God how to bless us, when to bless us, and what that blessing must be, has defined the way I have always heard this story of Jacob at the river. Perhaps it has affected your hearing of it too. “Ah yes,” we think. “This is the story of Jacob’s blessing.” But is it really? Or is it about something more, something much wilder and much more terrifying to us nice, domesticated creatures?

Jacob was on his way back home. It had been 20 years since he had fled his homeland, fearing for his life. Since that time, he had acquired two wives, two mistresses, eleven children, and hundreds of sheep, goats, camels and donkeys. Life had been good for the supplanter, the bargainer, the haggler Jacob. But he had worn out his welcome at the in-laws home and needed to get back to his roots. And Jacob had the sneaking suspicion that some of his past deception was about to come back and bite him. Esau was still around. And Jacob figured that Esau was still plenty-angry.

So the bargainer Jacob got creative. He split his large group up in half. That way, if Esau killed one group, there would still be another one and he would not suffer a total loss. Then, once they reached the river Jabbok, he decided to sweeten the deal with Esau. Perhaps his brother also had a craving for blessing. Jacob decided to bet on that possibility and started sending smaller groups ahead of him. He sent 220 goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 30 donkeys, and a bunch of servants. “When you run into Esau,” Jacob instructed, “tell him that these gifts are from me to him and that I am coming along behind.”

Then, he formed two more advance teams until all of his possessions and his servants had started the journey. But Jacob was still not convinced that all of these gifts would be sufficient pay-off for all of his lying and deceiving. So he took his wives, his mistresses and his children across the river, too. And then, probably worn-out from all of his scheming, he crossed back over the river to stay by himself for the night.

And there, with his lone campfire starting to dwindle and the stars beginning to peek out of the darkness, he laid down to rest. But the next thing he knew, someone was on his back, wrestling him as if to the death. The Bible calls the wrestler an “ish,” or man. Jewish tradition says it was an angel. Jacob, himself, called the wrestler God. Whoever it was, the wrestler was powerfully strong and wily. Jacob and the wrestler struggled hour after hour, each one trying to pin the other, each one determined not to lose, each one using every ounce of strength and stamina that he possessed.

Hour after hour they struggled together, not speaking, only wrestling. And as the stars started to fade and the sky began to lighten, the wrestler made his move. He struck Jacob on the hip socket. Jacob winced but refused to let go. He may have been a deceiver, a bargainer, a liar, but he was also incredibly tenacious.

The wrestler’s time for striving with Jacob needed to come to an end. “Let me go, for the day is breaking,” he said. “I will not let you go until you give me a blessing,” Jacob responded. Classic. But then, a shift. “What is your name?” asked the wrestler. And you have to wonder if in that moment Jacob’s mind quickly returned to 20 years before, when his dying father Isaac had asked the same question. “Son, what is your name?” At that time, Jacob, in his tunnel-vision for blessing, in his selfishness and greed, had blatantly lied. “Esau,” he had claimed with the anesthetizing taste of deceit on his lips.

And now, after all these years, after a long journey towards home, after a long night of struggling and wrestling, now, he was once again being asked his name. He was once again being asked who he really was. And for the first time in his life, Jacob chose honesty over deceit. For the first time in his life, Jacob chose to just say what was real, instead of what he thought the other might want to hear; or what he thought he should say to get what he wanted; or what he thought he should say to simply stay safe. He spoke the truth. “Jacob,” he said, probably still out of breath from the struggle –physically and spiritually. It is Jacob. It is supplanter. It is deceiver. It is liar. It is cheater. It is brokenness. It is sinner. My name is Jacob.

Then the wrestler, still in the cover of dark, responded to this truthfulness from Jacob’s mouth and soul. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have striven with God and with humans and prevailed.” And with those words, it was as if Jacob had passed through the waters of mercy. With those words, Jacob became Israel, a name that can also mean “God preserves.” Jacob was finally honest with himself and with his God about who he was, who he had become, his sinfulness, and his brokenness that prized selfishness and greed above everyone and everything else.

And in return, through the chaos of the wrestling match, he was blessed with a gift far greater than he could have asked or imagined. He was given a new name, a new start, a new chance. In that moment, Jacob was **finally** given the answer to his prayer at Bethel—not the comfort and safety and prosperity part—but the God be with me part<sup>iii</sup>. And finally for Jacob, that answer to prayer was enough. Through the struggle, through the nighttime wrestling, through his time of fear and honesty and exhaustion, Jacob finally opened his heart to receive whatever God thought was necessary for God to give him. And he and his whole life were changed as a result.

I wonder if this story is not so much about Jacob’s blessing as it is about Jacob’s wrestling. For in that wrestling match, it was as if he began to struggle less with the “ish,” and more with himself. Something happened to Jacob in that frightful, chaotic, nighttime wrestling match with the Holy. And thankfully, even though he was probably scared to death, even though he was probably spiritually worn-out from 20 + years of lying, cheating and scheming, **Jacob refused to let go of the one who also refused to let go of him.** In that wrestling match, Jacob finally stopped trying to domesticate, to bargain with, to supplant God, and just decided to hang on, wrestle, and receive whatever he would receive.

And in the end, he received a wound, didn’t he. A wound from wrestling with the holy. That is probably one of the things we fear most, isn’t it. I suspect our fear of being wounded is one reason we spend so much of our time trying to tame, to domesticate, to control even God. We are scared of the nighttime wrestling with the Holy, with ourselves, during which we cannot see, during which all we can do is hold on and receive whatever we might receive. And yet, perhaps in this story of the wrestling match we might see that alongside the wound, Jacob also received a new birth, a new life, a new purpose. He became Israel, God preserves.

And as he limped along home, no longer fearful of his brother but just genuinely remorseful; no longer trying to figure out how he could best work the angles; no longer thinking only of himself; Jacob/Israel said again and again in his mind “I have seen God face to face and yet I have lived.”

And when Esau ran up to him in unexpected reconciliation, arms outstretched, tears running down his face, surely Jacob/Israel put his hand on his wound and thanked God for it. For through his wrestling came his salvation. Through his determination to not let go of the one who would not let go of him came his new birth.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Gospel Medicine*. “Striving with God.” Boston: Cowley Press, 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Qtd in Taylor.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, Taylor.